

Bulgaria's Halcyon Days – Roses, Rails, Chalices & Thrones



Brief description:

It is hard to imagine that there are still places in Europe untouched by the breath of civilization. Bulgarian villages and monasteries have managed to maintain the local traditions, crafts, folklore, architecture and charm.

“Bulgaria’s Halcyon days” is an exciting rural and active tour revealing some of Bulgarian highlights seen through a pilgrimage walk to the most important Orthodox sanctuary in the country - Rila Monastery; a bicycle ride with views to the white-capped peaks of the UNESCO protected Pirin National Park; a slow-train experience to the remote areas of Rhodope Mountains and through authentic home-made dishes that will send you back to your childhood. Experience rose-picking workshop and rose-jam preparation in the Rose Valley and learn more about the Ancient Thracian Civilization and its Golden Treasures.



Location:

- Starting location: Ohrid, Macedonia, 13th May 2016, 08:00 am
- Ending location: Sofia, Bulgaria, 18th May 2016, 10:00 am

Trip Difficulty:

- Cultural and experiential trip with easy activities: walking and cycling (2 level)

Trip Highlights:

- Pilgrimage walk in the century-old forest of Rila Monastery (UNESCO)
- Wine-tasting in Melnik wine region and tasting the culinary traditions of Bulgaria
- Walking in Belasitsa Nature Park and Melnik Sandstone Pyramids
- Scenic cycling in Southern Rila Mountains and Southern Pirin Mountains
- Slow-train ride through the pristine and mystical Rhodope Mountains
- Rose-jam workshop, garnished with bagpipe performance in the Rose Valley
- Cycling city tour of Sofia and walking city tour of Plovdiv Ancient Town



Day 1: Belasitsa Chestnut Forests & Wine-tasting at Melnik Winery

Transfer from Ohrid, Macedonia to Belasitsa Mountains, Bulgaria (4.00 – 4.30 hours).

Belasitsa Nature Park is an area of century-old chestnut forests protected by Natura 2000. The park has lots of waterfalls, eco-trails and endemic flowers. We stop for lunch in a small village at the footsteps of the mountain.

Next, we head to Melnik region (1 hour by bus), known as one of the top wine regions of Bulgaria and as the legend says, it was Churchill's favorite wine wine-producing land. So let's try some unique, autochthone Bulgarian wine!

The day ends with an overnight at the winery "Zlaten Rozhen", where we will stay for the night and enjoy the serenity of Southern Pirin Mountains.

Walking time: 2.30 hours (difficulty: easy)

Daily transfers: 350km/ 5.30 hours

Night stop: Rojen village, 3* Winery-Hotel "Zlaten Rozhen" (www.zlatenrozhen.bg/hotel.php)

Day 2: Melnik Sandstone Pyramids & Pilgrimage to Rila Monastery (UNESCO)



The day starts with a walking activity through Melnik Sandstone Pyramids (aprox. 2.00 - 2.30 hours) or riding, for those who enjoy scenery better on bikes (aprox. 1.30 – 2.00 hours). The hiking/biking activities end at Melnik Old Town, one of the iconic Bulgarian cities and known as the white-painted village. Melnik is famous for its Byzantine architecture and Mediterranean food, and even more, for its beautiful surroundings of sandstone pyramids.

Next we head to the Valley of Rilska River, where the biggest Bulgarian sanctuary is to be found: the Rila Monastery. It is a UNESCO World Heritage site, from the 10th century, known as the spiritual center of the country. Short pilgrimage walk (aprox. 1 hour) through the century-old beech forests leading to the St.Ivan Rilski hermitage cave.

The day ends in Bansko – the Bulgarian best known tourist center for ski and mountaineering, on the foot of the UNESCO protected Pirin National Park.

Walking time: 2.30 + 1.00 hours (difficulty: easy)

Biking time (optional): 1.30-2.00 hours (difficulty: easy)

Daily transfers: 220km/ 3.30 hours

Night stop: Bansko town, 3* Family-run Hotel "Rahoff"

Day 3: Cycling in Rila Mountains and Keeping Traditions Alive



The day starts with a short transfer to Dobarsko village (18km), hidden in the southern foots of Rila Mountains. The village is known for its vibrant folklore and with the peculiar frescos of its 17th-century church. In the church yard we will be welcomed by local grannies. They keep the authentic folklore alive and will bring us back in time with their traditional songs and costumes.

We get on the bikes for a short but picturesque ride with views to the snow-capped Pirin National Park. Once we get to Gorno Draglishte village, we will stop for lunch at the house of a lady known as the Bulgarian slow-food magician, Deshka. She speaks no English, but gestures say it all, be ready for surprises!

After lunch we get on the bikes for another short ride to Belitsa train station, from where we take the narrow-gauge train. The train goes through Pirin, Rila and Rhodope Mountains and is one of the emblematic rides in Bulgaria. During the ride we will most probably have the chance to meet the Bulgarian Muslim Ethnicity and to get to know a bit more about their traditional way of living. The train is the only public transport connecting their remote mountain villages with the civilization. Enjoy the ride and make new friends!

The day ends in the authentic little village of Kosovo, hidden in the pristine forests of Rhodope Mountains. The village is inhabited by 8 people, but the local pub is open daily, this we call of-the-beaten track. ☺



odysseia-in.com

ODYSSEIA-IN Sport & Travel Agency Ltd

Sofia 1301, Bulgaria 20-V, Al. Stamboliiski Blvd, Entr. "Lavele"

T + 359 2 9890538 | F + 359 2 9803200 | Mobile (office) + 359 886 880100

<http://www.hiking-bulgaria.com/>

* For those who want to explore the beauty of the Rhodopean forest a late afternoon walk will be offered in the surrounding areas of the village.

Cycling time: 1.30 hours (difficulty: easy)

Daily transfers: 200km/ 2.45 hours

(+1 hour train ride through the mountains, an insight experience with local people)

Night stop: Kosovo Village, 3* Authentic Bulgarian Houses "Kosovski Kashti" (www.selokosovo.com/)



Day 4: Plovdiv Old Town and Rose-jam Workshop



Transfer to Plovdiv - one of the oldest cities in the world. In 12 century BC it was a rich Thracian settlement. Later one Plovdiv was invaded by Greeks, Celts, Romans, Huns Byzantines, Bulgarians and Ottomans! We will explore the Old Town of Plovdiv with numerous cultural monuments from different historical periods: the Roman amphitheater, the Roman stadium, the Eastern Gate from the 4th century, the Ethnographical museum, the Djumaya Mosque from 14th century, the oldest in Bulgaria, mansions from the 18 - 19th century. No doubt that Plovdiv is the country's most visited and beautiful town. Plovdiv is voted to be the European cultural capital 2019.

In the afternoon we will discover the Valley of Roses; we will pick up roses and will transform them into the best hand-made holiday gift: rose jam in a jar! During this small workshop we will enjoy some traditional bagpipe music (in live) and will garnish the experience with Bulgarian rose brandy. Nazdrave!

Overnight and dinner in Kaloffer city.

Daily transfers: 300km/ 4.20 hours

Night stop: Kaloffer city, 3* Family-run "Tsutsova kashta"

Day 5: Cycling (or walking) Sofia City Tour and Thracian Golden Treasures



Today we head to the capital of Bulgaria – Sofia, where we will meet the authentic heritage of the Thracian Civilization and their worldwide famous Golden Treasures.

Experiencing Bulgaria without visiting Sofia will not leave you with a scarce impression of the country, but it's much more rewarding if you spend a few hours strolling along (or cycling through) its yellow-cobbled streets, its antique's market, its many churches and Roman ruins. Worth visiting are also St.Alexander Nevski Cathedral, the National Theater, St.George Rotunda, and the National Archaeological Museum which guards one of the most famous Thracian Golden treasures, found in the lands of nowadays Bulgaria, dating back to the 4th c BC.

The day ends with a farewell dinner in a traditional restaurant in the capital.

Daily transfers: 180km/ 2.00 hours

Night stop: Sofia city



Practical Info (the tour includes):

- 5 nights in Bulgaria (3-4* accommodations)
- All meals (5 breakfasts, 5 lunches, 5 dinners)
- 1 wine-tasting in Melnik Wine Region
- All transfers (as according to the above itinerary)
- Professional English-speaking tour guide
- Bicycles and helmets for the ride in day 3 and day 2 (optional)
- Rose-picking and rose-jam preparation workshop
- Tickets for the mountain narrow-gauge train
- Entrance fees to the sites visited during the trip

Price for non-ATTA delegates/ media:

450 Euro / per person (5 breakfasts, 5 lunches, 5 dinners, entrance fees, transport)

Proposed guide: Stela Samouneva & Simeon Dimitrov

Contact Person:

Stela Samouneva, e-mail: stela@odysseia-in.com, mobile: +359 888 940 163

Simeon Dimitrov, e-mail: simeon@odysseia-in.com, mobile: + 359 883 367 833